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CIA Gave Political Aid to Contras

Millions in Secret Funds Funneled to Rebels Last Year, Officials Say

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The Central Intelligence Agency, barred from providing military aid to Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries, secretly funneled several million dollars to them for political projects over the last year, according to U.S. government officials.

The officials said the money went to the rebels' political umbrella group, the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) to pay rebel officials and supporters, open offices in Europe and Latin America and cover trips to seek foreign support for their cause.

The money came out of the CIA's overall budget, over which President Reagan and CIA Director William J. Casey have wide discretion. The CIA must inform the two congressional intelligence committees of such covert spending, and officials said the agency did so.

The officials, who spoke only on condition of anonymity, said the CIA described the spending as go-

ing for "political projects." While not providing a precise spending figure, they said it came to several million dollars.

The clandestine aid also allowed the CIA to maintain a strong influence over the rebel movement, even though a congressional ban existed from October 1984 through last September, prohibiting the agency from spending money "which would have the effect of supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua," the officials said. The CIA assistance was separate from \$27 million in nonlethal aid approved by Congress last year for the rebels.

CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson refused comment on the political aid but said the agency "has complied with congressional restrictions" on its activities.

While the intelligence committees were informed about the secret contra program, other members of Congress appeared unaware of the current CIA role.

One knowledgeable U.S. official described the CIA effort as "a major program" intended "to strengthen the [rebels'] civilian leadership and create the aura that they are an actual political entity among our allies in Europe."